www.alhassanain.org/english

MODERN TECHNOLOGY, PREVENTIVE ETHICS, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION:

SHOULD WE RENEW OUR MORAL PHILOSOPHY FOR THE EVER-RENEWED TECHNOLOGY?

Mashhad Al-Allaf

The Petroleum Institute, Abu Dhabi, UAE

International Journal of Arts & Sciences,

CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934 :: 4(13):161–168 (2011)

Copyright © 2011 by InternationalJournal.org

Table of Contents

[Abstract] 3
INTRODUCTION AND THE METAPHOR OF TITHONES.....4
NEW MACHINES AND CHANGE OF CONCEPTS 5
FOUR GROUPS OF PHILOSOPHERS LOOKING AT TECHNOLOGY 6
ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY.....8
PREVENTIVE ETHICS, AN ISLAMIC APPROACH..... 10
REFERENCES 14
Notes 15

[Abstract]

Modern technology brought us not to the end but to the edge of our fate and unless we have a good vision about where we are going, then we will neither be able to save ourselves nor our future generations. In this paper, I argue that technology is increasingly intruding into our philosophical questions about the very meaning of life and mortality. Technology is intervening into our conceptual scheme by redefining concepts such as happiness, intelligence, beauty, life, and death. For example, death, is no longer a part of nature itself instead it belongs to technological advancements of tools and equipments; with technology death can be delayed (with the dream to be avoided). If this occurred then we will be similar to Tithonus in Greek mythology as will be discussed in this paper.

I bring attention here that we should not adapt any ‘techno-pessimist” approach against technology such as that of Kaczynski, nor that of the “techno-optimist” of Kurzweil. I argue, that both are -to some extent- unrealistic. This paper carefully analyzes the ethics of responsibility approach that is presented by Hans Jonas, who thinks that traditional ethics is no longer sufficient for modern technology. I end this paper by offering a supportive approach to the ethics of responsibility, which I call preventive ethics in order to guide technology to the right path.

Keywords: Ethics, Technology, Bhilosophy.

INTRODUCTION AND THE METAPHOR OF TITHONES

New machines are forcing us to change our concepts. The ventilator for example, by pumping air to the lungs, can prolong life of the comatos people and delay death regardless of consciousness, but the question here is not about “life” indeed it is about the “quality” of life. Our state with technology is not that far from the story of Tithonus in Greek mythology:

Tithonus a human, was considered very attractive to the point that the daughter of Zeus, a goddess, fell in love with him. Tithonus lived on earth, but she lived in the heavens with the rest of the goddesses. He loved to always be near her, in order to keep him closer she asked her father if he could give him some of the god’s attributes such as eternity so he can live with them in the heavens. Then Zeus granted Tithonus eternity and the daughter was able to raise him to heaven and they both happily lived there. However, the daughter started to notice that Tithonus started aging. She realized that she had made a mistake and had forgotten to ask her father to not only give him eternity but to also give him youth. He grew old, continuously without dying and unable to do much and was left alone. He started to shout, make noise to get attention, he became noisy and intolerable, and finally the daughter asked her father to lock him in a cage, and Zeus did. After that Tithonus was transformed into a grasshopper.

Ethics deals with the question: “how we ought to live?” it deals with the actions of human beings. We traditionally have standards and codes for the moral actions of people; these are usually found in monotheistic religions also in philosophy. Since the nature of human actions has changed, due to modern technology, therefore we should call for a change in the traditional ethics as Hans Jonas rightly observed.1 The human actions has been empowered by technology and changed due to the new inventions to the point that machines became models for understanding human beings. Worse than that “man has been added to the objects of technology.”2

NEW MACHINES AND CHANGE OF CONCEPTS

New inventions and new machines are actively contributed to the change of our philosophical concepts, for example the ventilator as mentioned earlier, helped to continue pumping air to the lungs and keep a person who is in a coma state breathing regardless of losing consciousness, so the machine assisted in prolonging life and this process delayed death, thus our traditional concept of death changed to a new one which is called “brain death”; with the assumption of not avoiding death but at last delaying it. The concept of brain death itself is vague and not agreed upon; the criterion of measuring it varies from an operational one to a mere reflective, we can mention the irreversibility criterion, the cognitive, and Harvard criterion as an example.

The list of how machines changed our concepts is long and you can just reflect on some such as the refrigerator and the concept of ‘freshness’, the cell phone and the concept of “communication”, the internet and “virtual reality”etc, this is an interesting topic but it is much wider than my prefatory remarks in this paper where the focus is philosophical reflection on ethics and technology.

FOUR GROUPS OF PHILOSOPHERS LOOKING AT TECHNOLOGY

To the influence of modern technology on our life, philosophers and thinkers reacted differently. For the sake of clarification I will simply divide them into four groups:

1- A. The pessimist who wants to go back to nature and at the same time attach the progress of technology to stop it as a harmful progress to nature and man, an example here is the naturalists and the nature based romantic people; a specific example could be Theodore Kaczynski.3 In regards to artificial intelligence, Kaczynski postulated that if computer scientists succeeded in developing intelligent machines that do all things better than human beings, then, all work will be done by machines with the least of human effort. In this case either machine will make their own decisions without human oversight or human control over the machines might be retained.

If machines were effectively controlling people, then people would not be able to turn machines off because they would be so dependent on the machines; that turning machines off would amount to suicide. On the other hand, if humans control machines then the elite will have greater control over the masses and because human work will no longer be necessary then the masses will be superfluous; a useless burden on the system. If the elite is ruthless, they may simply decide to exterminate the mass of humanity. If they are humane, they may use propaganda, psychological or biological techniques to reduce the birth rate until the mass of humanity becomes extinct.

2- The optimists who believe that the progress of technology is a good thing that will improve the human condition and make society better, an example here are the majority of people who believe in the power of technology such as almost all politicians to improve the state by better technology, and Ray Kurzweil4 who replied to Kaczynski. Kurzweil thinks that Kaczynski advocates a simple return to nature by dropping technology and reverts to a simpler time, even though he made a compelling case for the dangers and damages that have accompanied industrialization, still Kaczynski's vision is neither compelling nor feasible. Kurzweil thinks that after all there is too little nature left to return to.

3- The group that does not use technology but at the same time does not attack technology or its progress, this community lives according to the community standards and religious belief such as the Amish community. Their concept of "progress" is also good, but is not defined in terms of technological advancement.

4- The group of thinkers who are deeply and philosophically concerned about the human condition and the future of humanity; have no problem with the progress of technology as long as there is a parallel progress in the moral and social aspects of society so that technology will not affect the future of humanity. Those thinkers are neither pessimists nor optimists. You can find

thosethinkers in monotheistic religions and other religions. In this group, we can distinguish two lines of reasoning that are closely connected:

1- The group that calls for renewing moral philosophy by emphasizing the role of “responsibility” such as Hans Jonas.
2- The group that commands the ethics of responsibility and goes further to call for “preventive ethics” by reviving that which has been neglected for many centuries.

ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY

In this section I will focus on the importance of responsibility as a central theme in any moral philosophy that needs to handle modern technology properly. Jonas thinks that our progress in technology, and dealing with nature without the ethics of responsibility is an act against the future of mankind, in this technological progress, Jonas asks: "What kind of obligation is operative in it?" Is it Utilitarian or just a command that we should not "saw off the branch on which we sit?"5 but the "we" here is not necessarily the present condition of man kind, it is most likely the future generations who will pay the price; since the human good known in its generality is the same for all time, its complete locus is always the present. Modern technology brought us not to the end but to the edge of our fate and unless we have a good vision about where we are going, then we will neither be able to save ourselves nor our future generations. This new vision has to be equipped with practical philosophy and wisdom; it has to be different from the previous traditional moral philosophy. Because with modern technology, new issues have appeared such as: global conditions, environmental issues, cloning, and genetic engineering. All these issues were not part of the traditional ethical theories such as those of deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and the ethics of virtue. Jonas rightly commented that "previous ethics and metaphysics provided not even the principles, let alone a ready doctrine"6 for such issues that are essentially related to the future of humanity, most of these moral theories are at their best ethics of the "here and now" let's take Kant's categorical imperative, as an example: "Act so that you can will that the maxim of our action be made the principle of a universal law." If we look at this rule, which is also called the rule of universalization, it justifies an act as morally right if the act can be universalized with no contradiction, take for example theft to the maxim or universalize it that every one is stealing from everyone else, what is wrong with that? Well, it contradicts the concept of personal property; therefore stealing is immoral because it causes contradiction on this maxim level. If we look carefully at this rule of Kant, then we find the following:

Can

Can Not

Contradiction or No contradiction

This is based on a famous law in Aristotelian logic called the law of non-contradiction: A can not be true and false at the same time. You can't "will" stealing and preserve its opposite (legal property) at the same time, you can not negate property by stealing and preserve it at the same time. This is contradictory, because A can not be true and false at the same time. Thus, as Jonas noted Kant's ethics is not about moral dimensions, it is about logical compatibility.7

There was always an attempt to build ethics on Logic, such as Kant's attempt, or build it on geometry such as that of Spinoza, Ethics based geometrical method, or on calculus, such as the attempt of Bentham and Mill to measure pleasure. I think that all these attempts of seeking consistency are of no use in ethics because consistency is a standard of empty systems in pure mathematics where there is no relation to reality.

While in applied physics a theory has to be related to facts. In ethics, values are related to human actions and how to control the desires of the human soul, so we are not talking about consistency rather about commitment, responsibility, sacrifice, and moderation. Also how to act in way that is not harmful to the present and the future condition of humanity. Jonas tried to modify Kant's principle to be: "Act so that the effect of your actions is compatible with the permanence of genuine human life." Or "In your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will."8 Jonas believes that if you look at his principle from the traditional approach you will immediately see that there is no rational contradiction involved if you violate this kind of imperative; it is possible to "will"the present good while sacrificing the future good of humanity, but most importantly in this imperative is that the new imperative "says precisely that we may risk our own life-but not that of humanity…that we do not have the right to choose, or even risk, nonexistence for future generations on account of a better life for the present one."9

If you raise the question why we have such an obligation toward generations that do not even yet exist? Jonas has no answer, but he left a good hint in saying: "To underpin this proposition theoretically is by no means easy and without religion perhaps impossible. At present, our imperative simply posits it without proof, as an axiom."10 The first hint is the need for justification, because in ethics, as a normative field and part of philosophy, a rational justification is always needed to prove validity of ideas. Second, he reflected the need for religion for such justification otherwise it is impossible. To some extent this reflects that Jonas thinks that ethics is based on religion or at least moral values stemmed from religion. To this we might be able to see an answer from an Islamic perspective.

PREVENTIVE ETHICS, AN ISLAMIC APPROACH

Contrary to Descartes, Islam set the relationship between human beings and nature in a cooperative way; human beings in Islam are neither the masters of nature nor the possessors of it. Descartes thinks that man is “maître et possesseur de la nature” (the master and owner of nature), thus man can rule over nature and manipulate it for his own use. In Islam a human being is the trusted vigornasec of God on nature, meaning they do not own it, and must use it according to the law of God in the best possible way. On the other hand nature itself is being facilitated (Taskhir) by God to be used by mankind:

“Do ye not see that God has subjected to your (use) all things in the heavens and on earth, and has made his bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen? Yet there are among men those who dispute about God, without knowledge and without guidance, and without a Book to enlighten them!” (Qur’an, 31:20)

The Qur’an clearly states that the misuse of nature and natural sources by human beings will lead to unbalance in life and to corruption and suffering. Human beings can bring corruption on earth and to the environment, and create a problem for future generations and for nature itself:

“Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned, that (God) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil).” (Qur’an, 30:41)

In Islam God is the creator of the entire universe including mankind. Human being is only a vicegerent of God on earth (khalifa) and is a trustee of God on Nature (not the master) in order to improve life on it:

“Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." (Qur’an, 2:30)

Now if we go back to Jonas’s question about “why should we have moral obligations towards future generations?” Every human being in Islam is unique and is created uniquely and enjoys a status higher than “value” which is called “dignity”, each person deserves respect as such due to this status of dignity. The human beings of the past generations are not of less value than the present generation; and the future generations are equally important. In the Qur’an God gave human beings (Children of Adam) a rank that goes beyond value, which is dignity, God says:

“And We have certainly dignified (honored =Karramna) the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.” (Qur’an, 17: 70)

When God dignified human beings, then every human being becomes invaluable by the action of God Who gave this intrinsic worth through uniqueness.

-If Qur’an had given only value to humans, then human beings become valuable but at the same time replaceable by equivalent value.

-Since we know that there is no equivalent value for any human being (because of uniqueness).

-Therefore, every human being is irreplaceable, and has the intrinsic worth and respect that is called in the Qur'an Dignity.

In Islam the duty not to harm other human beings goes over time and covers the present and future generations because it revolves around the internal absolute worth and dignity of each person as such; and because God treat people equally and no one should be victimized nor be held special to cause harm.

Kant: Why should we respect a person?

Kant, in his book *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, discussed price and dignity:

"In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an *equivalent*; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity."11 Kant considered value to be, that which bears equivalence in the process of exchange.12 The problem with this definition is that it does not make a distinction between the essence and the attributes. Human life is unique and invaluable. It is the very essence of attributes and values that we can possess. Life cannot be a subject of exchange simply because there is no equivalence to it.

The discussion of dignity and uniqueness, in the light of Kant's philosophy, revolves around the idea that respect due to a person is related to autonomous action based on rationality and free will. This action must submit to the universal laws of ethics. But if this is the case, then lack of rationality means lack of dignity by default. This cannot be true. Consider a mentally challenged person, although he or she may not have the capacity for rational decisions we still respect that person, and he or she still possesses dignity. One might argue that the lack of privacy eliminates dignity. Unfortunately, the lack of privacy does not necessitate the lack of dignity. If rationality and privacy are not a major component of dignity, then what is dignity?

I believe a better definition of dignity must exist. Dignity of a person resides in the very control of the self, before it is even manifested in moral or legal actions. A simple example exists in the desires of the soul that have the least connection to morality and legality, such as the desire to eat. If the desire for food becomes the controlling factor in the personality to the extent that there is no concentration on social life, it is only on food, a person has not violated any moral universal law according to Kant. They will not be punished legally either. However, they will not be respected morally. The inability to control the self caused the repetition of fulfilling the desire. The desire is irrationally cloning itself. The more repetition, the less dignity. Controlling desires of oneself is a good sign of exercising power over power, and shows the ability of living moderately according to the law of God, not to our ability of rational justification. Thus, controlling our present desire to abuse nature by irresponsibly consuming; is a good way of exercising power over the power of the carelessness. Future generations are equally important, and should not be harmed. In Islam saving one soul is equal to the saving of all mankind.

"On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people." (Qur'an, 5:32)

God is the lawgiver who regulates (legally and morally) the relationship between human beings themselves, human being and nature, human beings and the rest of the creatures. Each person who is mature and mentally competent is an autonomous being and as thus responsible for his or her actions in this life and in the hereafter. They should treat each other according to a universal and an absolute code of ethics, not a relativistic or opportunistic one. God in His law (Shar'ah) defines right, wrong, good, evil, happiness, the forbidden (Haram) and the lawful (Hala), the encouraged, the discouraged, and the permissible. To live by the law of God (Shari'ah) is to ensure salivation in the hereafter. The law of God is reveled for one reason: To help people achieve their benefits and prevent them from causing harm.

The objectives of the Islamic law are to preserve the five necessities that are most essential to any society (Muslim or non-Muslim society) want to live properly, these five necessities are:

Religion
Life
Intellect
Procreation
Property

Islam also calls for a moral/legal protection through its famous rule of commanding the good and forbidding the evil and making this as both individual moral responsibility and the responsibility of state for legal regulation.

I hope that the above notes on the Islamic perspectives helped in answering Jonas's question on why we have such a moral obligation towards the future generations, simply because in Islam this represents a respect for oneself through respecting humanity and there is no human being better than another; all are unique in the sight of God and deserve an equal opportunity to life.

Islam in its thrust to achieve justice does not allow a person to be held as a special case above others, all are equal and responsible.

We need to go back to see how Islam deals with the relationship between humans and nature by presenting what I call preventive Ethics. By preventive ethics I mean the rules and principles that deal with actions of avoiding harm, the non-melaficence acts that come in the form of prohibitions. In Islam, the command of God to prevent harm has no present tense; it encompasses the past the present and the future, since the message of God is intended to be to that last day of man on earth. One of the teachings of the prophet (pbuh) is that:

"Harm should not be inflicted and reciprocated."

The meaning of this rule in the principles of Jurisprudence is to: prevent harm from happening in the first place and to remove it as soon as possible after it has happened, if occurred. Of course causing harm in Islam is

absolutely forbidden in any form, harm must be prevented whether it happens intentionally or unintentionally. There are five sub rules of this universal rule in Islam:

1. Harm should be prevented as much as we can
2. Harm must be removed
3. The greater harm can be prevented by lesser harm
4. Private harm should be tolerated to prevent public harm
5. Preventing harm has a priority over procuring benefits

REFERENCES

1- Elliott, David**. Uniqueness, Individuality, and Human Cloning**. Journal of Applied Philosophy 15 (3): 217–230, 1998.

2- Jonas, Hans. **The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

3- Kaczynski, Theodore. **The Unabomber Manifesto: Industrial Society & Its Future**. Jolly Roger Pr. 1995.

4- Kant, Immanuel: **Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals**, trans. H.J. Paton, Harper & Row, NY, 1964.

5- Kurzweil, Ray: **The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence**. New York, Viking, 1999.

Notes

1- Jonas, Hans. The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. P.1. Jonas's ideas were first published as an article: "Technology and Responsibility: Reflections on the New Tasks of Ethics," Social research 40, no.1(1973): pp 31-54. This article was later published as a part of the book mentioned above. From this point on throughout my paper, I will be referring to the book. On page 4, Jonas summarized the characteristics of previous Ethics and traditional theories: 1. All dealing with the non-human world, i.e., the whole realm of techne (with the exception of medicine), was ethically neutral. 2. Ethical significance belonged to the direct dealing of man with man. Including the dealing with himself: all traditional ethics is anthropocentric. 3. for actions in this domain, the entity "man" and his basic condition was considered constant in essence and not itself an object of reshaping techne. 4. The good and evil about which action had to care lay close to the act, neither in praxis itself or in its immediate reach, and were not a matter for remote planning.

2- Ibid. P18.

3- Theodore Kaczynski in his book "The Industrial Society and Its Future"

4- Ray Kurzweil: The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence. New York, Viking, 1999.

5- Jonas, Hans. The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Ibid, p. 7.

6- Ibid. P.8.

7- Ibid. P.11.

8- Ibid. P.11.

9- Ibid. P.11.

10- Ibid, P.12.

11- Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. H.J. Paton, Harper & Row, NY, 1964, p. 102.

12- David Elliott: "Uniqueness, Individuality, and Human Cloning," p224 For further discussion